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# *District 9* and *Avatar*: Science Fiction and Settler Colonialism

Lorenzo Veracini

*District 9* and *Avatar* are extraordinarily alike: both released in 2009, they tell a very similar story (even if they frequently invert the value signs). One would think that the scriptwriters have collaborated in some way. The first section of this paper analyses comparatively the two movies and identifies their common interests and a multiplicity of crucial differences. This comparison registers an extraordinary thematic and narrative convergence as a premise for the argument that is presented in the second section: in spite of their different approaches both movies present inherently settler colonial stories.

*Keywords:* *Avatar*; *Colonial Narrative*; *District 9*; *Indigeneity*; *Science Fiction*; *Settler Colonialism*; *White Settler*

(Please note: having watched these movies will help making sense of this article; reading this article, however, will definitely spoil watching the movies.)

*District 9* and *Avatar* are extraordinarily alike: both released in 2009, they tell a very similar story (even if they frequently invert the value signs). One would think that the scriptwriters have collaborated in some way (see IMDb 2010a, IMDb 2010b).<sup>1</sup> Critics have identified for both movies left- and right-wing readings, and the movies have been praised and criticised according to each commentator's political disposition. Thus, despite a 'progressive' tale of human–alien collaboration, *District 9* can also be read according to a 'regressive' register: it represents Nigerian immigrants as stereotyped and racialised figures, superstitious thugs with cannibalistic tendencies led by a gangster named after a former Nigerian president.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly,

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as some reviewers have also noted, despite its progressive stances and criticism of contemporary South African developments, *District 9* is incapable of effectively thinking beyond segregation (on the ‘progressive’ and ‘regressive’ readings of *District 9*, see Valdez Moses 2010). Similarly, *Avatar* was simultaneously censured as “a soufflé of left-wing attitudes” and condemned for its “brutal racist undertones” (Boaz 2010, Zizek 2010; for an enthusiastic review of *Avatar*, see, for example, Kaveney 2010). Another reviewer has perceptively observed that *Avatar*’s plot is distinctly colonial: the indigenous Pandorans *need* the help of a ‘White Messiah’ and the story is primarily about this character (Brooks 2010). Beside their most apparent political messages, however, this paper argues that both movies rehearse specifically South African and American foundational settler colonial narratives, a point that was neglected by commentators.<sup>3</sup> As such, these movies are neither left- nor right-wing – they are settler colonial.

This article focuses primarily on the narratives and tropes that these films mobilise, rather than their filmic qualities, or their contribution to the cinematic genres they are drawing on. One result of this choice is that it is more suggestive than conclusive – a more thorough appraisal would require an analysis of the filmic techniques deployed by these movies and their role in meaning-making. Despite this limitation, the first section of this paper analyses comparatively the two movies and identifies their common interests and a multiplicity of crucial differences. This comparison registers an extraordinary thematic and narrative convergence as a premise for the argument that is presented in the second section: in spite of their different approaches both movies present inherently settler colonial stories.

### **Exogenous and Indigenous Aliens; Indigenous and Exogenous Humans**

Directed by Neill Blomkamp, *District 9* tells the story of a peculiar alien invasion. The space invaders, however, are actually refugees – they are stranded and need human help. At first, they get some humanitarian assistance. In the movie, while South Africa seems to have overcome some of the most ostensible legacies of racial segregation, nearly 30 years after having been resettled in an emergency camp, the aliens remain segregated from humans. They are securely fenced in, and live in squalor surrounded by crime, neglect, filth, violence and abuse. They are also apparently and mysteriously leaderless. Directed by James Cameron, *Avatar* tells the history of a much more recognisable alien invasion: the invaders, though, are humans, and it is the indigenous people of Pandora – the Na’vi – that need help. In a sense, however, humans also need help: twenty-second-century Earth is desperately seeking to deal with chronic war, environmental degradation, resource insecurities and other catastrophes. On the contrary, the indigenous Pandorans live idyllic lives and are at peace with their environment. Humans, it is implied, should take example, not unobtainium samples (unobtainium is the extremely precious mineral resource that prompted human invasion in the first place). They will end up getting neither. In any case, *District 9*’s Johannesburg is the way the Earth should not be, and *Avatar*’s

Pandora is the way the Earth should be, and if aliens ‘invade’ Earth in *District 9* because they have no choice, humans invade Pandora in *Avatar* because their choices are limited.

The settings of these two movies could not be more different: a degraded slum in *District 9*, and Hometree, a giant willow connecting every Na’vi and the environment in *Avatar*. Yet, both stories crucially begin with the same narrative device: it is the need to enforce the displacement of aliens that produces the initial crisis. Thus, as the aliens are to be *forcibly* resettled to create space for human activity, both movies narrate what happens once the possibility of a voluntary resettlement is abandoned. Sustaining both narratives is the human demand that aliens relocate elsewhere, and the alien’s reluctance to comply. In any case, in both movies humans are in a position of power over aliens, and both movies are premised on another previous dislocation: the passage between another planet and Earth in one case and between Earth and Pandora in the other. As well as allegorical reflections on intercultural engagements and intergroup domination, both movies are thus also reflections on colonialism. Indeed, both stories engage with the well-established colonial genre describing the possibility of ‘going native’. But if *District 9* reproduces the classic colonial cautionary tale of a fall (see Valdez Moses 2010: 158–159) – even if it is a fall that does not foreclose the possibility of future renewal – *Avatar* replicates the equally classic, and equally colonial, celebratory tale of a renewed or newly acquired capacity to genuinely connect with the authentic and truly uncorrupted in a new place.

Both movies focus on a human protagonist and narrate his transformation (as a matter of fact, a number of transformations). In both movies, the main (human) protagonist turns alien, and both narratives climax at the moment when the boundary between self and Other disappears. These, however, are quite different moments: while the shift is degrading and unwanted in *District 9*, change is regenerative and sought in *Avatar*. Consequently, one movie is about a reality that turns into a nightmare, and the other about a dream that turns into reality. At the same time, while one movie is the story of an unsuccessful attempt to resist transformation and the other narrates its determined embrace, these movies outline very different journeys toward redemption. One is anchored to the hope of a future development that may bring a *backward* return to a past situation. The other, on the contrary, is linked to a *forward* move towards a new reality. Finally, as the protagonists are initially impaired, both movies also tell the story of their particular rehabilitation. Wikus, the human protagonist of *District 9*, has a withered sensitivity, which helps him to operate within a bureaucratic milieu; Jake, the human protagonist of *Avatar*, has crippled legs, which hinder him in the context of a militarised organisation. By the end of the movie, both protagonists have overcome their limits.

Wikus accidentally touches a disgusting alien substance; Jake is covered by the ‘seeds of Eywa’ (referring to this occurrence, Neytiri – the alien princess that supervises his Pandoran education – later confirms to the assembled indigenous tribe that “there has been a sign”). These incidents – contacts that initiate each protagonist’s transformation – evoke recurring tropes of European representations

of colonial encounters: a paranoid anxiety concerning the possibility of contamination on the one hand, and the fantasy of being perceived by indigenous Others as a demigod on the other (see, for example, Obeyesekere 1992, Sahlins 1995). The technologies that sustain these transformations, however, could not be more different: an alien-developed technology that literally turns a human body into an alien one, and a human-developed technology that introduces human DNA into replicas of alien bodies (these are then linked Wi-Fi to human brains). Thus, unlike Wikus, Jake has no real/unmediated contact with aliens. In one case, the alien is within, in the other, the human is without: Wikus is not himself, Jake is literally *beside* himself. It is these different figurations of identity that mark the distance between the cautionary and celebratory tales referred to above.

The bodily dynamics that shape these transformations are also crucially different. Wikus primarily *endures*: he experiences his new condition as painful, disgusting and constraining – he is chased, he needs to take cover. On the contrary, Jake is literally reborn: he *relishes*. His exploration of both a new condition and a new world is liberating and *exhilarating* – he chases, he exposes himself. But it is not only a matter of enjoyment; as Wikus discovers that he is transmogrifying into an alien, as an organic part of his very flesh turns alien, an intimate fusion of human and alien alterity is produced. Conversely, having lived a more worthwhile life through his alien body, Jake decides after proper consideration to turn the dream life into permanent reality. Wikus' DNA is 'in balance', although the alien part is gradually taking over, and Avatars are genetically manufactured human–alien hybrids. Even if both protagonists operate human/alien hybrid bodies, hybrid fusions of human and alien are shown as inherently unstable and temporary. Thus, no permanent hybrid bodily form is envisaged in either movie: it is either one or the other (psychologically, things are different: both Wikus and Jake remain stubbornly human).

These movies also confront the issue of a fulfilling social life. Wikus, who is initially embedded in a supportive if hypocritical social network ends up desperately alone; he becomes literally 'alienated'. Jake, who is initially isolated, ends up embedded (literally wired) in a complex social network. It is significant that Jake is three times an outcast and three times able to overcome his isolation. He does not belong with the military – he doesn't have functioning legs – but ends up being a great soldier. He does not belong with the community of scientists – he doesn't have a PhD, or his brother's specific training – but ends up gathering the best 'samples' ever (for an anthropologist's comment see Starn 2011: 179–180). Finally, he does not belong with the indigenous Na'vi, but ends up leading them to salvation. If their relationships with their respective milieus are problematic, however, these protagonists are especially meant to engage with their viewers. Both movies go to extraordinary lengths to facilitate the viewer's identification with the protagonist, and both movies experiment with narrative devices that allow the main protagonist to address the viewer in a way that is unmediated by a narrator. 'Documentary' footage of Wikus' activities is shown in the opening scenes of *District 9*, and Jake compiles a series of self-reflecting videologs: as the main protagonist is laid bare, as

the protagonist speaks directly to his viewers, we witness a sustained attempt to establish a special bond between them (identification is also helped, as many have noted by 3D technology, which allows unprecedented spectatorial involvement with the movies' surroundings). They share a complicit relationship. Thus, as the protagonist increasingly dissents from mainstream human activity and the viewer progressively identifies with the protagonist, tension and identification are used to deliver a powerful critique of contemporary developments (racism, xenophobia, militarism, expansionism, privatised violence, corporate power).

The protagonists, of course, also interact with humans and aliens. On the one hand, they *collaborate* primarily with elite aliens. Wikus joins Christopher Johnson's struggle on behalf of his people (Christopher is an elite alien who has repaired the command module that will enable him and his son to reactivate the damaged alien spacecraft – he intends to lead the exodus of his people *away* from bondage). On the contrary, Jake sleeps his way straight to the top, and seduces the indigenous leader's daughter. Neither Wikus nor Jake has time for alien commoners. On the other hand, both protagonists primarily *contend* with humans. The two main antagonists are both irreducible military men: Koobus in *District 9* and Quaritch in *Avatar* don't journey the protagonists' journeys – there is no transformation and therefore no possible redemption for them. They are both essentially alien killers, and they are both killed by aliens as they are about to kill the main protagonist (when he is finally about to turn into an alien). Indeed, it is a violent anti-human act of alien solidarity that marks the final and irretrievable transformation of Wikus and Jake into aliens. In *District 9*, however, this appears like an act of random violence – there is no ostensible relation between Wikus and the aliens who save his life; in *Avatar*, on the contrary, it is an act of love.

The aliens are either represented as exogenous or as indigenous Others – that is, as refugees in *District 9*, and as indigenous peoples in *Avatar*. The 'prawns' of *District 9*, however, are 'bugs', while the Na'vi of *Avatar* are attractive humanoids. If one type of representation sustains repulsion and alienation while the other encourages a pattern of sympathetic identification, the aliens of the two movies are at very opposite ends of the recognisability scale: insectoids on the one hand, and super humanoids on the other – unredeemable degenerates, and noble savages. Not only is their physical appearance different, Prawns and Na'vi also enjoy very different social lives. The former are irretrievably alienated and addicted to cat food, the latter are linked to all living creatures and to one another. Even their respective languages confirm a repulsion/identification pattern: *District 9*'s alien language is constructed around unwelcoming and distancing 'clicks' (distinctive phonemes of San, Khoi, isiXhosa or isiZulu language, see Valdez Moses 2010: 156); the language of the Na'vi, on the contrary, is a dignified and sophisticated constructed 'indigenous' language developed for the movie by University of Southern California professor and linguist Paul Frommer (Milani 2009).

Both movies also crucially touch on the issue of interspecies sex (of course, as the aliens are metaphors for indigenous and exogenous Others, these movies are actually

referring to the possibility/advisability of interracial miscegenation). If Jake sleeps his way to the top, however, Wikus is accused of sleeping his way to the bottom. This is a concerted and effective media campaign that is credible exactly because accusations of ‘prolonged sexual activity’ with aliens resonate powerfully with widely shared collective anxieties (Valdez Moses 2010: 159). The Nigerian degenerates of *District 9*, for example, organise an interspecies prostitution racket. Sex with the Other is thus an indelible and disqualifying taint in one case, and a marker of entitlement in the other. Yet again, and crucially, *it is not with his own body* that Jake has sex with Neytiri. While this narrative device restores a degree of sanitation, one wonders: do avatars have babies (at any rate, the original sex scene was deleted from the movie release, see *Huffington Post* 2010a)?

As it is multinational security and defence corporations that coordinate human activities, the privatisation of the military–industrial complex is a key target of both *District 9* and *Avatar*, and the protagonists of both movies at critical junctures shift their allegiance away from it. As well as the story of a human-to-alien transformation, thus both movies also tell the story of a shift from embedment within corporate structures to open rebellion against them. Wikus’ insurgency, however, is premised on self-preservation (only surviving he can sustain the hope of possibly returning to an original, unproblematic circumstance); Jake’s is a deliberate ethical choice. Despite a series of setbacks, the privatised military–industrial concerns in both movies remain intact (both directors have not ruled out the possibility of producing sequels). Even if after a final battle both movies end with the departure of the ‘invading’ spacecraft, however, this exit does not terminate the alien/human interface: in *District 9* a dispossessed, leaderless and more efficiently segregated alien multitude is relocated to a Bantustan called District 10, in *Avatar* an empowered – and armed – ‘alien’ human/avatar new leadership is firmly in charge.

Finally, Eywa, the ‘all mother’ that crucially intervenes to resolve the conflict in *Avatar* – it cannot get any more *deus ex machina* than this – has no corresponding counterpoint in *District 9*. A divinity that is everywhere (see Douthat 2009) is matched by a divinity that is not anywhere. In *District 9*, however, there are plenty of *men in machines*, which is also entertaining.

### **Settler Colonial Pasts; Settler Colonial Futures**

Beside their commentary on more immediately political and contemporary issues, and beside their display of a multiplicity of recognisably colonial references (an issue, as mentioned, that others have also raised), I would like to draw attention to the fact that these movies are especially related by their telling of specifically *settler* colonial stories. A focus on settler colonialism is timely and a growing literature has in recent years emphasised the structuring difference between colonial and settler colonial formations (see Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995, Wolfe 1999, Pearson 2001, Russell 2001, Elkins and Pedersen 2005, Coombes 2006, Pateman 2007, Goldstein and Lubin 2008, Belich 2009, Veracini 2010; for an argument identifying ‘settler colonial cinema’,

see Limbrick 2010). That in both movies the aliens' main role – like that of indigenous peoples in other settler colonial settings – is to be an obstacle, not to be exploited, is a defining element of both narratives and should be emphasised. They are in the way, and while they resent the prospect of forced removal (like indigenous peoples in other settler colonial settings) humans have no use for them (except as objects of scientific research). They are not expected to work, not as soldiers, for example, and not in the unobtainium mines (why execute complicated biotechnological experiments in order to make it possible for humans to use alien weapons, when the 'prawns' could be more effectively enlisted by MNU as mercenaries and made to use their weapons in exchange for cat food?). For humans, the aliens of these movies are *useless*; only their space is coveted. The aliens of these movies, like indigenous peoples in other cinematic representations, are primarily expected to move on (see Columpar 2010).

It is not only about the (im)possibility of exploiting indigenous or exogenous aliens. While both stories are linked to the specifically settler colonial need to *transfer* indigenous people away, both also express the equally settler colonial need to *indigenise* settler subjectivities (on narrative representations of settler subjectivities, see, for example, Goldie 1989, Ingram 1999, 2001, Lawson 1999, Johnston and Lawson 2000). Crucially, one protagonist turns into an exogenous Other; the other turns into an indigenous one. In other words, while one protagonist unsuccessfully tries to retain his indigeneity, the other successfully acquires his own. This distinction corresponds to different claims about settler indigenisation in settler discourse in South Africa and the USA. In settler South Africa, construing indigenous peoples as exogenous Others was a way to secure the primacy of the settler claim. The settler was 'at home' exactly because the non-settler was invariably from somewhere else. Conversely, in the context of US settler discourse, the indigenisation of the settler is recurrently deployed as a way to reaffirm the settler claim against those of other colonisers and as an antidote against a variety of recurring anxieties. Twentieth-century South Africa, after all, routinely produced and reproduced 'foreign natives', while, as Philip J. Deloria (1998) remarked at the beginning of *Playing Indian*, Boston Tea Party rioters dressed up as Indians (on performing Indianness and its role in enabling the construction of settler self and identity formation, see also Huhndorf 2001).

These are not coincidences, and in the allegorical frameworks of both movies, the mobilisation of foundational assumptions about settler indigenisation produces peculiar yet crucial inversions: the 'aliens' of *District 9* should then be seen as indigenous people that are treated as exogenous, while the indigenous Pandorans fighting under Jake's leadership should be seen as fighting an exogenous fight for settler independence against a colonising metropole. These movies' fictional and allegorical character ultimately allows them to sustain, in *District 9*, the recurring South African settler fantasy of dealing with 'aliens' that are truly exogenous, and ultimately disposable and dispensable, and, in *Avatar*, the equally ubiquitous American settler fantasy of an authentically regenerating separation from 'Old

World' corrupting ways. In this sense, both movies can be seen as re-enactments of settler colonial foundational stories (on settler re-enactments, see Agnew and Lamb 2009).

Jake decides to stay after surveying Pandora in an aerial hunting mission with his Banshee. He switches: "out there is the real world, in here is the dream", he concludes. But deciding to stay is not enough; he also decides to fight those who haven't. When Jake rallies the Na'vi forces before the final battle, he is thus rehearsing the rhetoric of American settler independence: "and we will show the Sky people that they can't take whatever they want! And that this is *our land*", he climaxes. He has declared his independence *and* he is staking a claim to the land. The logic that underpins Jake's claim is typically settler colonial (and dispossessory). By the time he performs this speech he is legitimately a member of the Na'vi community, but community recognition is ultimately premised on Jake's general mastery of the Pandoran environment. Yet if that recognition seems to ostensibly recognise an indigenous sovereign capacity to incorporate newcomers, what enables it in fact radically undermines *any* indigenous sovereignty. Reappearing after the military had escalated hostilities and destroyed Hometree, Jake is not welcome back among the Na'vi and cast out. And yet, when he re-reappears descending from above and riding a fearsome flying animal (Toruk), the Na'vi accept him back. Jake thus *owns* the land because he is better than indigenous peoples at *turning a wild thing into a useful one*. Jake, it should be noted, *domesticates* Toruk, a creature the indigenous braves could not even draw up to. While this logic, of course, reproduces the most fundamental and most recurring of settler claims, that the Na'vi should recognise Jake as leader *on this basis* reproduces a most typical settler colonial wishful fantasy and demand: indigenous people should autonomously consider settler self-evident mastery over *things* as a valid claim to property. At the same time, Neytiri's attraction for Jake, subtle and organic, is compounded by her fascination for his *adaptability* – a trait that she is fully aware is missing in her own people – and whereas settlers are typically celebrated for being fabulously adaptable, indigenous peoples are famously deficient in that department: Neytiri knows it, and likes Jake more for his settler traits than for trying to be a Na'vi (one corollary of settler fantasies of indigenisation is that the settler also fantasises about Indians fantasising about being settlers).

Settler indigenisation in *Avatar*, of course, inevitably transforms the status of really existing indigenous people. Since Jake has in fact out-Na'vied them, the moment when Jake takes up the Pandoran struggle and *takes charge* constitutes both the moment of his final indigenisation and the moment when really existing indigenous Pandorans and their polities become subordinate. The Pandorans may be fighting an external enemy, but they do so as 'domestic dependent nations' of a larger pan-Pandoran polity that has by then a radically new political configuration and a new human/avatar *armed* leadership. On the one hand, the indigenous leadership has been comprehensively replaced. While the 'noble death' of an indigenous chief is a recurring settler colonial trope that forecloses the possibility of a surviving indigenous sovereign capacity, in *Avatar*, for extra safety the Na'vi leader is killed

twice: once leading his people away from the war zone, and then again leading his people to die in the war zone. On the other, the defeated invading army marches on its way out in front of a heavily armed hybrid indigenous/exogenous militia that is clearly in control. Thus, with the expulsion of the invading humans at the end of the movie, an expulsion that is actually a screening – many humans are actually invited and decide to stay, Jake's is not an isolated choice – Pandora begins its existence as an independent polity. Indeed, the need to effectively resist external invasion has forced all the Pandoran polities to *confederate*: one can almost imagine two factions consolidating shortly after, one arguing that now that the humans have been chased away, each Pandoran polity should be left alone to enjoy a peaceful life, the other maintaining that the risk of renewed invasion calls for the establishment of a permanent institutional framework. Would this sound familiar? It is significant that even the fact that Eywa ends up intervening in favour of the Pandoran patriots rehearses Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* argument that it is nature itself that demands the independent separation and unity of the New World polity.

Even Jake's conversion turns out not to be what it seems. The religious/spiritual dimension of *Avatar* has been the subject of concerned debate. Ross Douthat (2009) in the *New York Times*, for example, has called it an "apologia for pantheism", and Jonah Goldberg (2009) in the *Los Angeles Times* has lamented that the good guys in *Avatar* did not accept "Jesus Christ into their hearts". Neither, however, has recognised that Eywa herself is transformed in the movie from a pantheistic goddess that is necessarily aloof to an angry monotheistic God that takes sides and acts *in the world* as the biblical god would. Neytiri knows that it was Jake's prayer that convinced Eywa to intervene. Ultimately, it is Neytiri who converts, not Jake, and it is not Jake that accepts Eywa in his heart, but Eywa that hears Jake's prayer and decides to show who's got Grace and who doesn't (this is worryingly literal: Grace – the character – has just been 'rejoined' with Eywa, and Jake has had access to her memory). White or otherwise coloured messiahs can't really function in pantheistic settings, and if openly converting the natives seemed politically incorrect, converting their deity is always an option. While Eywa takes sides, the Na'vi become an elect people, and end up carrying out God's will under a leadership that is subject to divine guidance. It becomes a recognisable 'God bless Pandora/America' scenario. Douthat (2009) should have waited to the end, and Goldberg (2009) does not need to worry.

Similarly, the fact that Christopher and Wikus *fight together for separate ends* should also be emphasised, because, far from an allegory about interracial common opposition against injustice, their united struggle against a common enemy ultimately reproduces the rhetoric of a separate development that characterised apartheid's political rhetoric. Their solidarity is genuine but inherently situational. Wikus saves Christopher in order to be saved (Wikus at one point is tempted leave Christopher to his dreadful fate but doesn't; and later, when it is Christopher that is abandoning Wikus to a dreadful fate, he does so only after solemnly promising that he will return). Despite Wikus' transformation into an alien and into a person that rejects his own racism – a crucial development that should not be downplayed –

Wikus and Christopher remain irretrievably different; they will never come from the same place; they will never want to go to the same place. Significantly, both Wikus and Christopher want a *return*, but their returns are irremediably apart. One is a *spatial* displacement that will bring the aliens back to *where* they come from. The other is a *narrative* displacement that will bring the protagonist back to *when* everything was right. Their desires are apart, they desire to be apart (one corollary of settler fantasies of transferring indigenous people away is that the settler fantasises about people he construes as aliens *wanting* to leave him alone).

Thus, left- or right-wing readings notwithstanding, both movies end with the reaffirmation of a settler colonial order: a more complete segregation for the former inhabitants of *District 9*, with an exiled leadership that has promised to help, even if there is no way of knowing whether this external help is actually forthcoming, and the accomplished settler independence of Pandora. These are happy endings.<sup>4</sup> The reason why we are relieved when the mother ship departs at the end of *District 9* is because we hope that it may one day come back and make the disturbing Prawns really and finally disappear. The reason why we are relieved when the mother ship departs at the end of *Avatar* is because we hope it may never come back. Reviewing *Avatar* for the *Weekly Standard*, John Podhoretz (2009) noted that *Avatar* “ask the audience to root for the defeat of American soldiers at the hands of an insurgency”, and that “it is a deep expression of anti-Americanism-kind of”. Podhoretz, however, should not worry too much. The reason why we cheer in *Avatar* at the defeat of the military–industrial complex at the hand of armed insurgents is because the Pandoran freedom fighters are easily recognisable as putative American patriots, and because the mercenaries are the red coats (this does not mean, of course, that *Avatar*’s basic narrative cannot resonate with the experience of others – it is not by chance that the movie developed a truly global following).<sup>5</sup>

In his work on US science fiction Carl Abbott (2006) has insightfully outlined the ways in which this genre routinely imagines the future as an extension of a ‘frontier’ past (more generally, see Rieder 2008). While *Avatar* fits in easily with this tradition, it is significant that science fiction emanating from the ‘Global South’ (Helgesson 2010) should also think about the future by reference to a settler colonial past (of course, they remain different movies because they refer to *different* settler colonial pasts). That neither director *wanted* to present a settler colonial story, and that, on the contrary, they both aimed at addressing other social and political concerns – worrying xenophobic tendencies, for example, environmental anxieties and doubts about foreign wars in the quest for resource security – confirms that settler colonialism in many ways still goes without saying. As mentioned earlier in relation to a determination to established spectatorial relations, Wikus and Jake are cast in the role of protagonists, the camera routinely privileges their point of view and the sound design strategically privileges their voices. Another reason why we cheer, however, and another reason why we identify unreservedly with both protagonists, is that the stories we tell ourselves and the ones we like to hear, especially when it comes to imagining the future, remain inherently settler colonial stories (on settler colonial-

ism's narrative resilience, see Veracini 2010: chap. 4). In their different ways, both movies constitute a strong critique of the present by imagining a future that remains entrapped in a settler colonial past and its foundational narratives.

If, as many have noted, *District 9* is a uniquely South African story, and specifically an allegory of apartheid-era settler South Africa (Goodman 2010), *Avatar* is certainly not an anti-American, or necessarily an "anti-military, anti-corporate, or anti-capitalist" story, as some have argued (Boaz 2010). *District 9* tells the story of a white guy who ends up spatially constrained, alone and stranded, surrounded by aliens, living like one of them, *turning into one of them*, abandoned by family and betrayed by corporate capital after a lifetime of service. We should not ignore the significance of his personal development, but as far as nightmares go, this is the most (settler, white) South African nightmare one can tell. Similarly, *Avatar* is *Pocahontas*, *Dances with Wolves* and *Independence Day* all in one (in that order). It tells the tale of an embattled individual who arrives from a world that is in mortal danger, survives in the wilderness, develops a special relation with the new place, regenerates morally and physically, makes this place *his* home, finds a new purpose, compels the indigenous people to recognise that he belongs, that he is entitled and that he is boss, and finally expels those who have not committed to the new place. Cameron is right (even if he probably would not be prepared to say precisely why): *Avatar* is "not un-American" (*Huffington Post* 2010c). On the contrary, it is the most (settler, non-indigenous) American story one can tell.

## Notes

- [1] Editor of science fiction website *io9.com*, Annalee Newitz, has also likened the two movies. They are movies where the "[m]ain white characters realise that they are complicit in a system which is destroying aliens, AKA people of colour". They then go "beyond assimilation and become leaders of the people they once oppressed", she noted (in Root 2010).
- [2] The Nigerian government protested loudly against the movie's portrayal of Nigerian characters (see, for example, *BBC News* 2009).
- [3] A recent collection of academic essays dedicated to *Avatar* is exemplary in this respect. The themes explored in *Filosofie di Avatar* include philosophy, cultural production, the ecologic imaginary and post-human hybridisations, but fail to mention the fact that this is basically a movie about a guy whose notion of 'home' shifts from one place to another (Caronia and Tursi 2010). A failure to detect the operation of settler colonial narrative tropes, however, is not new and was highlighted, for example, by Linda Dyson (1995) in her review of Jane Campion's *The Piano*. Dyson argued that a movie that was uncritically received as a feminist exploration of nineteenth-century sexuality should actually be read as primarily responding to New Zealand settler colonial anxieties over national legitimacy and belonging.
- [4] And yet, the name Pandora inevitably evokes a tragic dimension. American expansionism, as depicted by Cameron, is a reference to Pandora's box.
- [5] Bolivia's indigenous president Evo Morales really liked the movie (*Huffington Post* 2010b), and Palestinian activists dressed up in Na'vi costumes recently participated in the weekly protest against the West Bank wall in the occupied village of Bil'in. A piece published in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* commented: "Just imagine how surreal it must have been for Israeli soldiers to shoot tear gas and rubber bullets at blue-skinned, pointy-eared aliens" (Gilinsky 2010).

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